



THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

Themes in the News for the week of Dec. 13-17, 2010

The Year 2010: High Expectations vs Wishful Thinking

By UCLA IDEA

Less money and diminished resources. Fewer instructional days. Summer school and after-school programs eliminated. Libraries and some school campuses closed. Thousands of teachers and classified employees fired. These are some education news stories that dominated 2010.

Political ironies are much overrated these days; however, we can note that the year of cuts was accompanied by a year of raised expectations. The federal government's Race to the Top competition called on states and districts to pledge more action and better results. Perhaps the most attention-grabbing story of the year was the *Los Angeles Times* publishing the so-called value-added scores of 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade teachers. Disclosure of testing results for teachers in these three grades was promised to improve instruction even as the supports for teaching and learning declined across all 12 grades. Little in the news covered schools' struggles to accommodate cuts in effective teacher supervision, targeted professional development, and adequate books and materials for classrooms.

It was also a big year for "alternatives" that promised improved results at no additional costs; for example, ramping up the charter school movement as an alternative to public school systems even as charters produced negligible learning gains relative to regular public schools.

When higher expectations (amidst declining resources) have little chance of being realized, they might more accurately be called "aspirations." It is good to aspire to reach our dreams of high-quality education and high-student performance, but what we expect has to be based on the practical, real-life conditions schools face. We may not like these actual low expectations, but we can't wish them higher or pat ourselves on the back because we are making "progress."

Affected by the deepest economic crisis of our generation, some California youth can't concentrate on school while their families struggle with their food budgets. Unemployment in the household affects children in ways that school teachers, curriculum, and standards can barely touch. "We're seeing a lot more kids just in a state of struggle all the way around with their basic needs," said a high school principal interviewed this summer for a UCLA IDEA report. "That's going to impact their academics because that's not an immediate thing[.] Learning math today is not immediate whereas eating is."

To get a real-time picture of how the economy was affecting students and services offered by the schools, UCLA IDEA surveyed and interviewed hundreds of high school principals across the state. The data, anecdotes, and analysis from this research are new features in IDEA's California Educational Opportunity Report, which will be out in February.

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To be sure, there are some policy-driven reforms and some moments of funding relief (federal stimulus funds in particular) that have muted school decline. However, Californians owe much to their schools, administrators, teachers and staff who make extraordinary efforts, each day and largely unseen, to address their students' needs. Some schools have raised money to help pay for families' rent or bills. They have donated food and clothes to students. Teachers have taken in homeless students. What once might have been called "heroic" efforts, today sound like the "new normal" as principals report efforts to patch together quality educational programs in the face of budget cuts, crowded classrooms and fewer teachers. "You know that the media almost never talks about that," said one principal, "because it doesn't sell newspapers, or T.V. commercials, but there's a lot of good that is happening in our schools all the time, every day."

2011 brings new leadership and new challenges. Gov.-elect Jerry Brown has announced that the budget crisis is deeper than he or the state's analysts have realized. Without bold action, the pain of 2010 will be felt even more deeply this coming year. Yet, Brown and the public still hold high aspirations for California's public schools. In order for realistic expectations to match our aspirations, the state must find a way to confront and reconcile its need for services with a willingness to pay for them.

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